

Propos

A
Dissertation on Anasarca

By

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By this term is meant a preternatural collection of watery fluids in the cellular spaces of the body.

Pathology. Much contrariety of opinion has always existed in regard to the pathology of dropsy. It is now however generally allowed to arise from a derangement of that balance which in a natural state subsists between the powers of secretion & absorption.

In persons of health there is always a watery fluid poured out or exhaled in vapour into the various cavities of the body and interstices of the cellular membrane and taken up again by the absorbents—hence it follows that dropsical affections may depend either on excess of exhalation or a diminution in the powers of absorption.

But still the question occurs which of these two functions is in fault?

From a view of the general conditions of the system—the various circumstances connected with dropsy—and the nature of the principal remedies suited to its cure—and from the deepport given by

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some of the best practitioners, it is right to presume that there is in this disease very generally excessive action of the exhalents.

This however is a point of less importance since whether the absorbents or exhalents be in fault it is admitted on all hands that our remedies are to be directed to the invigoration of the action of the absorbents.

Symptoms. Anasarca generally appears first with a swelling of the lower extremities towards evening which disappears for a time in the morning. The swelling at first is always elastic and readily receives the pressure of the finger, which leaves an indentation for sometime after the pressure is removed, the skin becoming much more flaccid than natural at these points of pressure. By degrees the swelling proceeds upwards, occupying the thighs and trunk, and at length even the face and eyelids become bloated. As the disease progresses respiration becomes difficult and uneasy from effusion in the cellular membrane of the lungs; the bowels become constipated.

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- plates; the urine scanty and high-coloured; the skin hot and dry; the pulse febrile, small and corded, together with an almost insupportable thirst. After this the disease advances with great rapidity:

Torpor and a heavy drowsiness with a slow and indistinct fever supervene. The distention from the accumulation of the watery fluid is now so great that it forces its way through the skin itself and through the pores of the cuticle; or if too gross to pass by these emanatory vesicles or blisters are formed which burst and sometimes terminate in gangrene and mortification; and the patient is finally exhausted to death.

Causes. The same causes which produce the other forms of dropsy also produce anasarca; which are most generally some preceding disease, by which the animal economy has suffered much derangement; as intermittent fever, jaundice, diarrhoea, dysentery, gout, rheumatism, asthma, pulmonary consumption, exanthematous affections &c. obstructions

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and certain depraved conditions of the abdominal and thoracic viscera; and sometimes more debility without any other previous disorder of the system than a certain condition called the hydropic diathesis.

Treatment. Regardless of the theory that was so generally adopted by the European writers, which made dropsy to consist essentially in laxity of the system, and which led necessarily to the destructive practice of treating the disease indiscriminately with stimulants and tonics; it is perhaps enough for the present purpose to enter upon that treatment which now obtains with the best practitioners.

Anasarca may be associated either with an excited or debilitated state of the system. But it is in the first character that the disease is most commonly met with; being indeed almost invariably attended by a febrile condition of the arterial system and other inflammatory symptoms.

Nevertheless anasarca is sometimes a disease of feeble action arising from exhaustion of the

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general sepsis, or from disease of some of the great viscera, as the liver, spleen, pancreas, stomach &c.

Yet there is much obscurity as respects the exact condition of the body, in which this description of the disease occurs, and much of the uncertainty in our remedies arise from confounding these different states of the system.

By a late writer on the subject of dropsy* the qualities of the urine are considered as indicative of the real state of the system. He states that in dropsies of high excitement the urine always coagulates by heat or sedes acid; that when the disease is connected with visceral consequences, no indications of the liver, spleen &c. the urine is scanty and high coloured, loaded with a red calculeous sediment, and deposits nothing by heat; and that in dropsies of very feeble action the urine is very scanty and pale, does not coagulate by heat, and deposits no sediment whatever. These remarks relative to the urine deserve attention, yet

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late future experience shall establish the contrary it will not be right to give up the pulse for the appearance of the anasarca is not to the state of the system. The indications to be answered in the treatment of anasarca, in common with all other serous whatever be the state of the system; are first to evacuate the fluid already effused; and secondly to prevent the reaccumulation of it.

As before observed anasarca is most generally attended by an excited state of the system; and the treatment of it under this character shall be first considered. And here the first indication is to be met by the directly evacuant remedies.

Venesection. This the most powerful of the antiphlogistic agents will be found decidedly beneficial when excused by sound discretion and a proper regard to the constitution of the system. The pulse in the early stage of this form of anasarca is invariably hard tense and corded,

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and the blood when seen constantly shows signs of a high degree of inflammation, there is a hot dry skin, the tongue and fauces parched, great thirst &c. As long as such a condition of the system continues the lancet is indicated, and it should be repeated.

"A correct guide to the use of the lancet" says the author, above quoted "may be found in the formation, copiousness, and early appearance of coagulum in the urine, its limits in the improvement of that discharge, the state of the blood, and the relief of the other symptoms Cordials. It was formerly the practice to prescribe these remedies in dropsy under the idea of their great power in promoting absorption; and certainly they are not destitute of this power; but they have lost this former ground, and are now rarely given except to relieve a loaded and oppressed Stomach.

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portance in the treatment of this disease. not less from
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 than their power in reducing febrile excitement
 and removing that obstinate constipated state of
 the bowels incident to the commencement of dropsy.
 By the earlier writers the most drastic articles were
 prepared for this purpose but these are mischievous
 in the febrile stage of dropsy, increasing the heat
 and fever. It is much better in this stage of the
 disease to resort to a milder class of purgatives, and
 particularly to the lactate preparations. A com-
 bination of superlactate of potash and jalap con-
 stitutes an invaluable purgative under these circum-
 stances. These articles are generally prescribed in
 the dose of from ʒij to ʒij of the former to x or xv
 grs. of the latter, to be repeated so often as to keep
 up an almost incessant discharge from the
 bowels. Exhibited in this way this combination is
 alleged sometimes to remove the almost degree
 of anasarca in the course of two or three days.

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It certainly is one of the best purgatives that we
can employ.

Granted. But notwithstanding the general utility
of the above practice it does sometimes fail, and
we are compelled to resort to ourselves or that class
of remedies which act more immediately on the
absorbent system. In prescribing these remedies
however, we are slow to recollect that we are treating
the inflammatory form of the disease, and there-
fore should have recourse to the milder class.
In this state of the disease the best of all the remedies
is the Sulfurated of Potash. Long used and de-
serving for its efficacy its reputation is more
established by general experience. There are two
modes of exhibiting this medicine to which it is
necessary to attend. When exhibited in a large
quantity of water it acts merely as a diuretic,
whereas the same dose given in a small quantity
of water or in the shape of an electuary produces
a combined operation on the kidneys and bowels.

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Much has been said of the powers of the alkalis in dropsy of the two fixed alkalis potash seems always to have had the preference. By the older practitioners the ashes of a variety of vegetables were employed being efficacious however only from the alkali which they contain they have been supplanted by the common carbonate of potash.

The cases of dropsy in which the potash proves most beneficial are probably those connected with great deprivation of the powers of digestion, and such are most generally met with among drunkards, and it is not very unusual under such circumstances to find a considerable evolution of acid in the stomach, producing or associated with, some very distressing affections.

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the head a practice which originates with Sir
 Dr. Keightley its powers are very much augmented;
 tending to remove the gastric disorder, while its
 diuretic property is said to be increased.

The alkalies however are inferior to the neutral
 salts; of these the nitrate of potash is eminently
 suited to dropsies of high action. This is inferior
 to some others of the class as a diuretic. but it has
 a powerful influence over the arterial system,
 reducing the inflammatory symptoms. This
 objection is it is, that when prescribed in adequate
 doses to make a strong empyreum, it excites nau-
 -sea and we are obliged to lay it aside.

The dulcified spirit of nitre is a medicine far less
 offensive and may be employed as a substitute
 for the above: it is however much inferior to it
 and is especially suited to children. But when
 freely given it operates relatively on the kidneys,
 and produces large discharges of urine; but to
 obtain this effect it must be liberally prescribed.

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not less than from 3j to 3i several times in the 24 hours: at least it should be thus largely given in dropsy.

The sal diuretic or acetic of potash was once a famous diuretic; but its powers in this respect have been greatly overrated.

Potash is now a remedy of considerable importance. It is stated to have cured a case of ascites when the patient had been twice tapped without effect and in other instances likewise it has proved highly beneficial. It is generally prescribed in strong decoction of the root.

As I have detailed them sever are the principal remedies generally used in inflammatory dropsy.

But as before remarked, anasarca may be associated with a feeble action either originally or may acquire this character in its progress, or by improper treatment, and here of course the treatment must differ from that above detailed.

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The system already suggested, it is inadmissible.

But purgatives are sometimes of the highest importance, and here it is proper to recur to the drastic. The obstinate constipation and extreme torpor of the elementary canal demands for their removal the most powerful cathartics as combinations of calomel and jalap, colocynth, scammony, elaterium &c.

It is also in this description of the disease in which a set of derivatives, inadmissible in the inflammatory stage of the complaint, is found efficacious.

Laxatives is an action of very valuable powers in this character of dyspepsia. From the known action of this medicine this would seem extraordinary, the fact is indisputable that it is on a system exhausted and enfeebled that laxatives displays its best effects. As long as there is much activity of the pulse or much general strength it will not only be inoperative but often productive of the

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pulse is full, the countenance pale and the
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ficial. In regard to the best mode of prescribing
this remedy considerable difference of opinion has
existed. By some an infusion is preferred while
others prefer the tincture or substance. The best
and safest ^{mode} is to prescribe it in substance.

The tobacco, a remedy closely allied to digitalis,
was not long ago introduced in the treatment of
dropsy and enjoyed for a while popularity. It is
however a very disagreeable remedy, equivocal in
its operation, and sometimes hazardous, and there-
fore should not be prescribed unless the other rem-
edies of known efficacy prove unavailing.

The squill is a remedy of the most universal
utility in all the forms of dropsy, but it is a
highly stimulant medicine, and hence must
be prescribed with discrimination and judgment.
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Scantharides are sometimes prescribed with very good effect in dropsy connected with a depraved and cachectic condition of the system: nor are we to fear their destroying the serenary organs, when given in the feeble forms of dropsy, and in liberal doses.

The spirit of turpentine is also prescribed in atonic dropsy and being a powerful stimulant and possessing a strong determination to the serenary organs it is not altogether without promise in such cases.

The polygala senega has been much extolled as a remedy in dropsy, but its reputation has suffered from a want of documentation in its employment in cases of anasarca dropsy dependent on a very enfeebled absorption and which are connected with a general cachectic state of the system it would seem but rather. And in some cases its effecting is greater.

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The *cocchium autumnale* is an exciting, purgative and stimulating medicine and enjoys a high reputation in these cases of dyspepsia on the Continent of Europe. tho. it does not stand very high with the American or British practitioners. It is prohibited in the cases of dyspepsia or venous disease.

The *pyrola umbellata* is another medicine which is gaining into regular practice, and from the evidence in its favour deserves the attention of practitioners. It is strongly diuretic and at the same time possesses power to the stomach.

The alteratives have been much employed in stomachic dyspepsia: of these the *stemon salivum* or common garden is the most efficacious. It is a highly stomachic alterative medicine and would seem best adapted to dyspepsia arising from habits of drunkenness and connected with debility of the stomach.

Diaphoretics are another class of remedies sometimes

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employed in the treatment of dropsy. They once indeed constituted the favourite practice in this disease but eventually lost their reputation they are however again revived and they would seem more particularly suited to those dropses which have their origin in intermittent fever and which are kept up by visceral congestions; mar-
ked by a long, a small tense corded pulse, cold extremities, dry skin and many other symptoms of feeble action on the surface of the body.

Diaphoresis may be produced either by external or internal means. The vapour bath is frequently a very efficacious mode of exciting the action of the skin. However under these circumstances, a combination of calomel, opium and ipecac is chiefly to be relied on. Even by the use of opium alone, given in large doses, cures of this complaint are said to have been accomplished.

This article is however much more to be relied on when used in the shape of Dover's powder,

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The *cupulatum perfoliatum* has lately acquired considerable reputation in the treatment of dropsy. It is perhaps best adapted to the disease when generated in miasmatic districts. The disease in such situations often assumes more or less of the intermittent character, and is frequently successfully managed by a combination of tonic and diaphoretic medicines.

The last general remedy to be mentioned in the treatment of ascites is mercury. When the disease is produced or kept up by obstructions of the viscera mercury becomes indispensable.

Nor is it perhaps less efficacious in dropsy by exciting the action of the absorbents, to which it exerts much of its power is directed. It is to be recollected however that in weak dropsy connected with a scorbutic or strumous contamination mercury is prejudicial. It is in dropsy when

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cury is most beneficial.

I have now enumerated most of the general
means to remove the water in dropsical swellings.
But in addition to these it is sometimes neces-
sary to resort to local measures for the same
purpose. When the extremities become very pain-
ful and much distended with water great
relief will be obtained by evacuating it by means
of small punctures with a sharp lancet. It
will be necessary however to be very careful and
not to penetrate too deep, as considerable suppurative
inflammation and gangrene may result.

It not infrequently happens that we are called
on to treat this last state of things, and when we
see it not to form a matter of considerable im-
portance. This tendency to gangrene is owing to
a want of vitality in the integuments which is
occasionally brought on by excessive distension

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from the officers since previous to the treatment in the case is very encouraging. Most, in other instances eminently serviceable in arresting morbid action, and tho they might sometimes be more benevolent, nevertheless frequently themselves induce the state we wish to remove, and therefore are employed with hazard. Frictions are sometimes instantly resorted to under these circumstances and are thus to some degree become most beneficial in arresting the progress of this fatal morbid action is the flannel roller, introduced in this case by Dr. Joseph Chapman. It should be applied so as to compress the parts lightly extending above and below the disease. Its modus operandi is quite intelligible: there is in the limb at the time a high action and temperature: the flannel roller embarks both warmth and vigour to the limb and thus enables it to resist the further encroachment of this affection.

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In the inflammatory stage the diet should be very low. Even entire abstinence from food is said to have cured dropsy; by lessening arterial action and of course increasing the absorbent function. But in atonic dropsy the system must be supported by a generous plan of living.

Much difference of opinion has existed on the subject of drinks in dropsy. Persuaded by the false doctrine which led some practitioners to forbid an indulgence in them it is sufficient to say that so far from being prejudicial they are now properly considered as useful auxiliaries in the treatment of dropsy. Common water answers very well; or water acidulated with vegetable acids; Infusion of juniper berries is likewise of great advantage, all to be freely taken. And in old protracted dropsies gin or whiskey and water (weak) make a very useful drink.

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answering the second indication, which is ^{to} prevent a reaccumulation of the serous effusion. To do this it must be our object, to effect a radical change in that condition of the system which predisposes to the disease. If the disease is of a limited character frictions will prove of much advantage - also tightly compressing the whole limb with a bandage. It is also recommended to employ the topical cold baths - We must also resort to exercise and tonic medicines, and of these the most effectual are combinations of the peruvian bark and the calybeate preparations.

If after all these means there still remains a strong and constant disposition to a return of the disease, we should revolutionize the whole system by an attenuated course of mercury; and should there be so much debility as to render the mercury inadmissible the nitric acid may be substituted and with decided advantage.

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